

# The Economist: networking a global niche

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The biggest threat to The Economist's current relative prosperity will be when they get wifi on Jumbos. Some carriers [are hoping to do so](#) within two years. Economist readers fly a lot and use the down-time between airplane movies and meals to consume the magazine. On average they spend about 43 minutes doing so. When else do they get that sort of space in their lives?



Edward Lucas

Joking apart, this is the kind of factor that is changing the media landscape. So The Economist is always looking to build its substantial 'niche' as the compact, intelligent, authoritative, liberal package of analysis and reportage for the Globatariat. As [The Economist's Edward Lucas](#) put it in a talk at the LSE, his magazine and its online operation is not just battling with the Times or Newsweek, it is in competition with 'everything that takes up our readers time'.

Lucas is the Central and East European Correspondent for The Economist, but that label hardly does justice to the range of interests that he brings to bear on the region. His [last book](#) talked about a new Cold War while his next one will unravel the RealPolitik of espionage. He is a great journalist in a traditional way: accurate, informed, well-travelled, well-read and a marvellous writer. But he is also a natural and

inveterate [blogger](#) who understands the new media environment acutely.

'The media business is becoming more rational' says Lucas. There is too much duplication and the institutional cross-subsidies for news are disappearing.

At the same time a whole new raft of platforms and tools enable journalists to connect to the public in a two-way process. It's what [I've described as the shift from fortress to network](#). But how does a top journalist in an elite institution make that shift?

One tactic is to use all the online tricks possible to engage readers with tricky graphics and some instant blogging. As Lucas says, The Economist can sometimes feel like 'homework' and so a little high-brow humour or off-beat riffing can help sugar the pill. Hence, his very amusing animation of a map of Europe, a piece of [Fantasy Cartography](#) that suggests geo-politics could be improved by moving the countries around.

Another is to use the online platform to deepen their offering. So Lucas says he can put extra 'really boring stuff' like [maps of pipelines](#) to illustrate an article on energy policy on his website version. They would simply clog up the magazine itself.

He also believes strongly in mining the expertise of his readers. He spends several hours every week in exchanges with people who have commented on the website or emailed him directly. He also has a select personal email network of readers that he uses to test out ideas and gather thoughts from his 'community'.

Of course, The Economist can actually benefit from the crisis in mass mainstream media. I pointed out in [SuperMedia](#) that some of the more traditional and even elitist forms of journalism will thrive in an environment where there is an abundance of information and a demand for reliable filters. As other news organisations close their foreign bureaux, for example, it is left as one of the very few with an extensive international network of correspondents.

I can't believe that I was reading (on a plane actually) an article on Somaliland last week in The Economist. Not only that, but one that went into the detail of regional differences *within* Somaliland. Now that is niche.

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